

Statement of Teaching Philosophy Jeff Behrends

When I first made the decision to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy, I was primarily motivated by teaching-related reasons; I was inspired by my own undergraduate instructors to see the job of helping others develop and appreciate the skills associated with our discipline as a worthwhile and fulfilling role. I remain thoroughly excited about teaching today, and have dedicated myself to improving my teaching alongside my research. While there are many variable external factors that will play a role in the design and structure of any course, there are several principles of course design that influence all of my classes. I see all of these principles as reflecting my commitment to enabling students to become active, engaged participants in their educational experience.

Courses must be aligned: Perhaps the feature that I value most in my courses is alignment, which I understand as a kind of coherence among the learning objectives for the course, the pedagogical techniques employed to help students meet those objectives, and the assessment tools used to determine how well those objectives are being met. In my courses, the goals are always clearly articulated. In-class and out-of-classroom activities are selected to help achieve those goals, and the success of those activities are assessed using graded assignments, non-graded self-evaluations, and multiple course/instructor evaluations throughout the term.

Learning philosophy requires doing philosophy: I think that one of my most important roles as a philosophy instructor is to help my students develop a set of skills – skills that will be useful to them in their roles as students, professionals, and citizens. Some of the skills in questions are familiar: acquiring abilities to identify arguments in written texts, to concisely and accurately restate those arguments, and to evaluate them, for example. However, philosophy instructors are also in a good position to engender the development of more complex skills, such as communicating calmly and clearly with disagreeing parties, and working with others to address complicated problems. In my courses, these skills are emphasized by requiring students to actually *do* increasingly complex activities that require those skills. For example, I design writing assignments in mid-level courses to allow students to practice exegetical and evaluative skills independently, prior to requiring them to employ both sets of skills in more complicated assignments. Additionally, many of my class meetings involve structured group activities that are aimed at developing the more social of the intellectual skills mentioned above.

Additionally, I have also recently begun thinking about how to encourage students to reflect on the integration of philosophical skills into their non-academic lives. To that end, I have integrated into all of my introductory-level classes an assignment which requires students to describe a scenario in which they took a distinctly philosophical approach to some situation, justify their view that they were deploying philosophical skills, and then assess how well they and others involved made use of those skills. My hope is that assignments of this kind will help students to understand the value of philosophy beyond the classroom.

Feedback should be frequent and forward-looking: In providing feedback on student performance, especially when doing so formally on graded assignments, I emphasize not only the ways in which their work is good or bad, but also the steps that can be taken to improve

future performance. As a result, my feedback tends to be primarily forward-looking. Designing frequent evaluative opportunities multiplies the benefits of forward-looking feedback; by avoiding long gaps of time between assessment opportunities, I can better identify whether particular recommendations that I've made are resulting in progress. In cases in which they are not, I invite students to speak with me in more detail about their work in the course. Often, those meetings reveal appropriate strategies that would not be obvious merely from engaging with written work. For example, I have found that some students require a fairly significant amount of guidance in learning how to read effectively – not because they are poor readers generally, but because they have failed to develop specific strategies for digesting complex texts of the sort often encountered in philosophy classes. Discovering such needs requires frequent contact with student work. To that end, all of my courses include short, frequently assigned written work. This is true even for the most advanced undergraduate courses that I teach, and I would also assign frequent, highly structured writing assignments in graduate seminars that I might have the opportunity to lead in the future. If you are interested in comparing how I use short, frequent writing assignments across different levels of instruction, I invite you to compare the syllabi from two courses that I have taught at ISU: Rights and Wrongs, and Topics in Moral Theory: Death, Well-Being, and Morality. Syllabi for both are available at my website: <https://sites.google.com/site/jeffreybehrends/>

Teaching well requires understanding how students learn: Most college instructors are understandably not themselves experts in the scholarship of teaching and learning. But as someone who is dedicated to being an excellent instructor, I feel a responsibility for familiarizing myself with current research about learning and post-secondary education. This sometimes takes the form of reading scholarly articles, but more frequently involves following general and philosophy-specific teaching blogs, staying in close communication with my colleagues about our own failures and successes, and keeping abreast of the work being done by members of the America Association of Philosophy Teachers, an organization to which I was first exposed while participating in their 2012 national Seminar in Teaching and Learning.